

» PIONEER'S SHOWSTOPPING SPEAKERS «

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PIONEER PREMIER TS-C720PRS GREAT SOUND AT A BARGAIN

BY BOB MORROW

PHOTOGRAPHY: CASEY THORSON

WHEN YOU THINK BACK TO THE DAWN OF CAR AUDIO, THE NAME PIONEER PROBABLY POPS UP AS ONE OF THE EARLIEST MEMORIES.

Not to date myself, but I remember back when Pioneer was a subsidiary of Craig. Sometime in the mid-'70s, Pioneer became a name unto itself and, since then, I can't count the number of TS series Pioneer speakers I've installed in my career. They were always a better-than-average choice, even that long ago. For this issue I got to evaluate the newest addition to the Pioneer Premier line of components, the TS-C720PRS (whew!) component set.

This set uses 6 3/4" low-frequency drivers, 1 1/8" soft-dome tweeters and a dedicated pair of passive crossovers.

IMPRESSIONS

The 6 3/4" woofer is an impressive piece. At first glance I noticed the robust cast aluminum frame that's been powder coated in a complementary gloss gray and gloss black finish that is the basis for this woofer. Its cone is a three-layer IMX (Injection Molded Matrix) composite made of a combination of interlaced Aramid fiber sandwiched between an Aramid fiber weave (a woven carbon-blended fiber,

hence the yellow and black cross-hatch pattern) and glass fiber layer to create a very light, stiff diaphragm for fast response and low distortion, to say nothing of a snazzy look.

The driver employs a 2" underhung voice coil that surrounds the pole-piece and a unique, gray powder-coated center plug. This is no pointy-looking dust cap adhered to the cone, but a true solid-metal, fixed phase plug for enhancing the imaging of the system. The all-important tensile leads have been glued to the backside of the cone so they can't rattle during operation and they're concluded by gold-plated screw-type

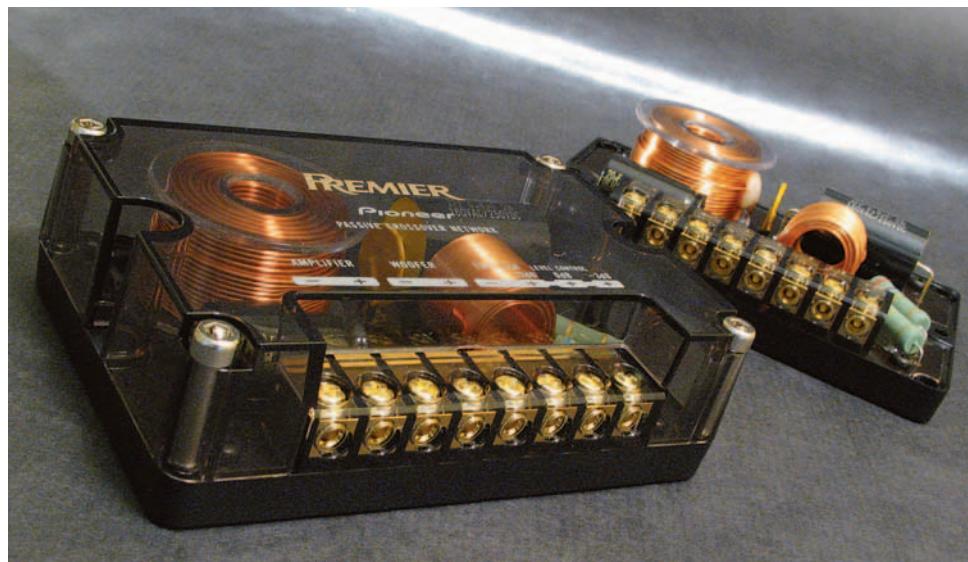
terminals built onto the frame to retain your speaker leads.

On the outskirts of the cone is a very cool, very different-looking high-density microfiber surround that looks and feels like suede. To paraphrase the Pioneer website, this extremely lightweight material features lower mechanical resistance and higher internal loss in comparison to other materials. Plus, this material is much less flexible than others, which stops unwanted "rolling" of the vibration system. Essentially, this keeps the voice coil in check under high power. This is further aided by the use of a cloth spider behind the cone to keep

everything in proper alignment.

Included with the system is a 5/8" spacer ring with multiple bolt patterns so you can match the pattern in your particular application even though the woofer itself is larger than most 6" factory speaker holes will allow for. Pioneer was also thoughtful enough to include an adaptor plate to fit 6"x 8" speaker openings. And, if you need grilles for your installation, a set is provided with the package. The only downside here is that you won't be able to see this great-looking woofer behind the mesh... and that's a shame!

The tweeter in this set looks like jewelry. It's set in a die-cast housing that's been machined to look like billet aluminum and has a black metal grille consisting of three bars that protect the 1 1/8" TetroN dome. The tweeter



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employs a sealed rear chamber, allowing for greater frequency bandwidth and a lower crossover point. It comes with installation hardware to cover just about any scenario that might arise, including surface angle mount, flush mount and behind-the-panel angle mount. The tweeter attaches with a spring steel clip and one screw — an elegant and pretty much foolproof system.

The crossover for the set is also quite interesting. It employs high-quality, large-gauge coils for both highpass and lowpass sections, poly capacitors and a polyswitch tweeter

protector. You also get a tweeter level network (using low, 5-percent tolerance resistors) allowing you to set the response at -3dB, 0dB and +3dB by attaching your speaker wire to different screw-type lugs along an eight-terminal strip on the front side of the crossover. The crossover points are listed as 2,000Hz, which bodes very well for imaging as more of the program material will come from the tweeter (the perfect fullrange speaker would be infinitely small and able to reproduce the entire frequency spectrum from 20Hz – 20kHz). Efficiency of this set is listed as 88dB.



INSTALLATION

Installation of the TS-C720PRS set was very straightforward, even without the help of the multi-lingual owner's manual, but in most cases I'd still recommend professional installation. With all the damping and panel

stiffening tricks a good, experienced installer would use, you certainly will get the most out of these impressive-looking drivers. Now that we've taken a look at these speakers, let's get down to it and see if they can live up to their appearance.

LISTENING

FEMALE VOCAL

DIANE SCHUUR "IT DON'T MEAN A THING IF IT AIN'T GOT THAT SWING"

Diane Schuur is a name I'm sure you'll recognize if you're at all familiar with any of the best female vocalists around today. She's been at the top of the vocal heap for well over 20 years and has a range and purity of sound few can equal, let alone surpass. I was very curious to see how well the \$550 Pioneer Premiers would reproduce all the subtleties and nuances inherent in this recording.

This piece starts off with a percussion ensemble featuring a guica (a Latin percussion instrument), full drum kit and some imaginative bass guitar work. All the various percussion instruments came through with great separation and placement on the soundstage, and the bass had very good low-frequency extension and a natural sound. About 20 seconds into the recording Schuur's vocal came in accompanied by a saxophone. Her voice was nicely centered and sounded quite natural, and the sax was also rendered without any unwanted resonances or overt aggressiveness; all the while, nice little percussion effects were happening. Cymbals, in particular, had a natural-sounding sparkle to them, and when Schuur and the saxophonist exchanged riffs in a scat duet, I'd swear I was sitting seventh row center in the audience. Even in the high register the Pioneers reproduced the sound without any perceivable harshness. The percussion break at about 2:30 was exceptionally well reproduced, as I could hear all the inner details very clearly and in the correct relationships. So far, listening to these speakers was truly a pleasure.

Score: 7.5/10

JAZZ

GROVER WASHINGTON JR. "JUST ENOUGH"

Washington has been one of my favorite sax players for more than a quarter century and some of you may recall that I've used his recordings for evaluating component sets before. This is mainly because he has such a unique sound. Sometimes his tone can be rather abrasive on certain notes if the speakers in question aren't of the highest quality.

This track started with a solo piano in the intro and the Pioneers reproduced the piano without any harshness. It's very obvious that the drummer was using brushes rather than sticks and the cymbals had a smooth shimmer to them that sounded very realistic. The stand-up bass had appropriate weight and low-frequency extension to the point that it was quite pleasing, even without a subwoofer. There have only been a couple of component sets I've tested that have shown this well in this area. Of course, in a car, a subwoofer would add some realism, but in this case, auditioning in my listening room, I was very pleased with what I heard. Washington's sax had all the realism and emotion I'd expect to hear in a live performance without any harshness or over brilliance – very nice and smooth. The piano, also very difficult to reproduce smoothly and faithfully, sounded terrific!

Score: 8/10

R&B

TOWER OF POWER "SQUIB CAKES"

Ah, Tower Of Power, king of the funky horn sound! These guys have been showing how it's done for almost 40 years! "Squib Cakes" is their hallmark instrumental, and it's bright, brash and dynamic. This Sheffield recording is extraordinary and the Premiers did a great job of conveying all the excitement. The baritone sax had appropriate bite; the horns were bright but not piercing; and the rhythm section drove the band hard, without even so much as a hiccup from the Pioneers. All instruments were in sharp focus, and I could have sworn the cowbell was in the room with me! Great width and depth of stage showed that the speaker engineers at Pioneer can get it right when given the chance and the budget. For a moderately priced set of components, they really did the job!

Score: 7.5/10

ROCK

EAGLES "HOTEL CALIFORNIA"

This song needs no introduction. If you haven't heard it, you must have been living under a rock or in a cave somewhere. I've said earlier that these compo-

nents have good low-end extension, but I must correct myself. They have excellent low-frequency performance that's nothing short of amazing! The bass drum that comes in after the flawlessly reproduced guitar intro could be felt in my listening room – the concussion was that dramatic! The shaker and other percussion sounded live and the speakers themselves disappeared. I felt like I was listening to a live performance. Each guitar was easily discernible and stayed isolated to its own place on stage, while all the little nuances that make the Eagles sound so unique came through loud and clear. It felt as if the audience was all around me and I could picture all the vocalists individually during the harmony parts. Joe Walsh's hollow bodied guitar had thickness and weight on the low notes but still retained all the brilliance and precision on the higher notes, never sounding edgy or harsh. I can only imagine how these speakers would sound in a high-end car audio installation. Quite a performance!

Score: 9/10

CLASSICAL

ITZHAK PERLMAN "POEME" (ERNEST CHAUSSON)

Anyone with even a passing interest in classical music has probably heard of Itzhak Perlman, one of the greatest violinists in the world today. This selection would be familiar to many of you out there, even if you don't recognize the title. The backing orchestra is the New York Philharmonic under the direction of Zubin Mehta.

The piece starts with the cello section introducing Perlman. The cellos were easily distinguishable by their dark, heavy sound rendered convincingly by the Pioneer Premiers. When the violin solo came in after about four bars, the realism continued. Perlman's violin sounded as it should — robust, dynamic and emotion-filled. The body tone of the instrument, in this case a priceless Stradivarius, came through loud and clear, with all the nuance and subtlety of a live performance. The orchestra behind the solo sounded huge and there was a sense of the space of the concert hall that was felt as much as heard. A violin in the hands of a master like Perlman can be very difficult to reproduce realistically without unwanted resonances, and notes that tend to jump out and bite your ears are a constant worry, but the Pioneers did a splendid job of replicating the original performance. I was very surprised by the fact that I experienced very little, if any, listening fatigue, even after hours of listening to this set. The highest notes of the violin, notes that would have the neighborhood dogs listening, were just as clear and smooth as the rest of the performance, and there was no breakup even at high listening levels. I'd have no trouble at all living with these speakers on a daily basis, and I don't say that about many speakers I review. Good job, Pioneer!

Score: 8.5/10

CONCLUSION

If you're shopping for a component set worthy of reproducing the front stage in your car audio system, make absolutely sure you audition the Pioneer Premier TS-C720PRS's or you'll be cheating yourself. At a suggested retail price of only \$550, they are one hell of a bargain. You could easily spend two to three times as much and not get a better sounding set of components for your hard-earned bucks. Hats off to Pioneer for a job well done! 

SUBJECTIVE SCORE CHART

	POINTS POSSIBLE	PIONEER PREMIER TS-C720PRS
Overall sound quality	20	16
Tonal balance (above 80Hz)	10	7.5
Low-frequency extension	10	09
Clarity at low volume	10	07
Clarity at high volume	10	08
Image stability	10	08
Listening fatigue (moderate volume)	10	09
Flexibility/Ease of installation	20	16
Total subjective score	100	80.5

Ratings: Average performance is equal to 1/2 total points possible.